

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

The Christian Science Monitor

Afghanistan aid workers' deaths highlights delicate position of Christian-affiliated groups

By Ben Arnoldy

08/11/2010

"Aid groups were falsely accused by a TV channel in order to bolster the religious credentials of an upstart politician in Burhanuddin Rabbani's coalition and to embarrass a political enemy in the Karzai government."

New Delhi – The murder of an international medical aid team in Afghanistan has driven home the delicate position of Christian-affiliated organizations operating in the country.

While focused on humanitarian work, not religious instruction, such groups sometimes face suspicion by Afghans and manipulation by antigovernment elements.

The 10-member team was gunned down Thursday after providing medical care in remote villages in northeastern Afghanistan. A Taliban spokesman claimed they were killed for spying and trying to convert Muslims. The team was assembled by the International Assistance Mission (IAM), a group that describes itself as an international nonprofit Christian charitable organization.

"Our faith motivates and inspires us – but we do not proselytize," said IAM director Dirk Frans at a press conference in Kabul Monday.

Christian-affiliated aid groups, including IAM, work in Afghanistan under self-imposed international codes of conduct that forbid using aid to further a religious standpoint. This has largely shielded Christian-affiliated groups from being targeted over religion, but both the Taliban and politicians have tried recently to pin the "proselytizer" label on such foreigners.

"So far, the large majority of Afghans, educated or not, had absolutely no problem in having Christian organizations providing assistance, as long as they did not get involved in religious matters," says Laurent Saillard, head of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief in Kabul. "But now I am afraid this is changing."

Mr. Saillard explains that even under the former Taliban government it was better to be seen as a Christian than an agnostic or atheist – marks of communism in Afghan eyes.

Christianity now a useful wedge

However, those now wanting to divide the international community from the Afghan people see Christianity as a useful wedge.

Saillard cites a recent case of two international nongovernmental organizations suspended in May over allegations of converting Afghans. The accusations were aired by a television channel tied to opposition politician Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Saillard says the two groups were falsely accused by the TV channel in order to bolster the religious credentials of an upstart politician in Mr. Rabbani's coalition and to embarrass a political enemy in the Karzai government.

The two organizations – Church World Service and Norwegian Church Aid – have been cleared by the Karzai government and allowed to resume their aid work. And in an interview with The New York Times, the TV station's director admitted the report was merely raising suspicions after seeing the two groups had "church" in their names.

Indeed, given the sensitivity of their names, both groups had been using abbreviations – CWS and NCA – as much as possible, says John Nduna, general secretary of ACT Alliance, an umbrella group of 100 church-related humanitarian groups.

With a group like NCA, he says, there can be misunderstandings that it's a church when in fact "the only thing it has to do with the church is the fundraising."

One Christian-affiliated aid group in Afghanistan says it's well understood among the donors in the pews that their group isn't proselytizing. And same for the Afghans they serve: "We are incredibly explicit that we don't proselytize, and anyone who does, if they are an ex-pat, will be on the next plane out of here." They say they have experienced little animosity – just a few cases of people unhappy with their portion of aid deciding to play

the religion card. Both this group and IAM say they won't be leaving because of Thursday's massacre.

ANSO, a security watchdog for nongovernmental organizations in Kabul, says the incident should not change threat levels. "ANSO doesn't see it as a shift in the strategic environment and we currently see no reason to change our advice to NGOs."

Many Christian-affiliated organizations in Afghanistan have significant numbers of Afghan Muslim staff who vouch for the organization in times when their Christian ties are highlighted, including now.

Codes of conduct Christian-affiliated groups can also point to one or more codes of conduct that they have signed. One of the most popular is the Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which states: "Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint."

The code, like other similar guidelines, restrains workers on the job from advancing religious beliefs, but doesn't apply to what happens off the job, in people's private lives. Mr. Nduna of the ACT Alliance says his members are "fully aware" of the need to be "sensitive and careful about how they respond to questions" from residents in places like Afghanistan.

The Afghan Constitution does not forbid Afghans from leaving Islam. But some versions of Islamic sharia law consider apostasy punishable by death, a factor in Afghan court deliberations. An Afghan convert to Christianity faced the death penalty in 2006 until the government, amid an international outcry, allowed him to flee to Italy.

"Religion is the only sentiment that keeps these people going on and keeps this society together. If you touch that, then you are going to provoke a major reaction," says Saillard.

Still not clear who killed teamWho killed the medical team and why remains an open question, despite the Taliban claims. Taliban expert Michael Semple notes "these killings are different in approach" and "took place well outside the Taliban command."

At his press conference, Mr. Frans of IAM released the names of all those killed in Thursday's attack.

Tom Little of Delmar, New York, led the team and was an eye specialist. He and Dan Terry, another American, lived in the country for decades. Dentist Thomas Grams quit his practice in Durango, Colo., four years ago to go on dental missions abroad.

"He knew the laws, he knew the religion. He respected them. He was not trying to convert anybody," said his twin brother Tim Grams. "His goal was to provide dental care and help people."

Also among the Americans were Glen Lapp, a nurse from Lancaster, Penn., Cheryl Beckett, a pastor's daughter from Ohio, who worked on mother-child health, and Brian Carderelli of Harrisonburg, Va.

A Briton, Karen Woo, quit private practice in London to provide humanitarian care in Afghanistan. Her family released a statement that "her motivation was purely humanitarian. She was a humanist and had no religious or political agenda."

A German, Daniela Beyer, and two Afghans, Mahram Ali and Jawed, were also killed. ---

Julius Cavendish contributed from Kabul and wire material was used in this report.